A Gulf Impassable

by Elizabeth (anghraine)

Summary

Elizabeth becomes a governess.

October 1799

‘Oh! I beg your pardon!’ Elizabeth cried, as both her boxes and those of the young lady she had collided with went every which way.

‘For-forgive me,’ the lady said, twisting her fingers together. Elizabeth picked up the boxes, dusted them off, and handed them over to her.

‘At least it is dry today,’ she said. The lady smiled weakly.

‘Georgiana?’ a man called, walking towards them. ‘Are you – oh.’ Both women looked towards him; with the same tall, well proportioned figure, the same even features, the same dark hair and dark eyes, he was clearly the girl’s brother.

‘Thank you for your assistance, ma’am,’ the girl said, blushing and casting her eyes down. ‘I am very sorry.’

‘I am in no particular hurry,’ she replied with a smile. ‘I live with my uncle and aunt, just down the way.’ She pointed towards Gracechurch-street.

‘Oh, I see. I - I am Miss Darcy, of Pemberley, in Derbyshire,’ she blurted, ‘and th-this is my brother M-Mr Darcy. Might we have the pleasure of your acquaintance?’
Elizabeth coloured. ‘Oh! I quite forgot. I am Miss Elizabeth Bennet—of, formerly of Longbourn, in Hertfordshire.’

‘Come, we will walk you to your uncle’s, Miss Bennet,’ the gentleman said.

‘That is not necessary — ’ Elizabeth demurred.

‘Indeed it is.’ He propelled both Elizabeth and his sister along, absently picking up her boxes and carrying them for her. Elizabeth smiled faintly; in the last few months, she’d had a growing conviction that her uncle Gardiner was the last true gentleman in the world. Even Mr Bingley had never bothered to pursue Jane any further, though she knew all of the family were in town, and his sisters, two shallow, vain fashion plates, had called several times.

‘You are formerly of . . .?’ Miss Darcy inquired shyly.

‘It was entailed upon a distant cousin of mine,’ she replied. ‘William Collins.’

‘Mr Collins! Why, my aunt’s pet cl— ’

‘Georgiana!’ her brother said sharply, then explained to Elizabeth. ‘There is a clergyman under the patronage of my aunt, Lady Catherine de Bourgh, by that name, who is . . . excessively grateful for her kindness.’

Elizabeth’s eyes opened wide. ‘Why, he must be my cousin, for his devotion to Lady Catherine is certainly unequalled.’

Miss Darcy bit her lip, Mr Darcy’s lips twitched. ‘I see. Is it down the Court, Miss Bennet?’

‘Oh, yes, forgive me.’ She hesitated as they approached the Gardiners’ house. The Darcys’ good breeding had at first prevailed, but now they were both looking around in unrestrained wonder at the many sights that met their eyes. She supposed they had never been in such a place before. ‘Perhaps you would care to come in?’ she asked tentatively. ‘My aunt and uncle will be very grateful — and my aunt, you have something in common. Her father was an apothecary in Lambton, and she was brought up there.’

‘Lambton! Why, that is but five miles from our home,’ Miss Darcy agreed, glancing warily at her brother.

‘I would be honoured, but we must return home,’ Mr Darcy said, rather coldly. ‘We are leaving for Ireland tomorrow.’

Elizabeth arched a sceptical eyebrow, certain of his real motives, but smiled. ‘Very well, thank you for your company, and farewell.’

‘Farewell,’ they chorused, and walked away after Mr Darcy had returned her boxes to her. For a moment she watched them, their long strides matching, and their dark heads bent together, vaguely intrigued; she turned away with a self-deprecating laugh and hurried inside.

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April 1800

‘Thank you, John.’ Elizabeth took a deep breath. Lord Carlisle was by all accounts an honourable
man, a widower devoted to his two children. There would be no danger—even if several lurid tales, courtesy of Lydia, briefly danced through her head. Her brows knit together at the sight of the great house. ‘Why, they are in mourning! Do you know . . .’

‘His lordship’s cousins, miss,’ John replied, with a touch of grisly pleasure. ‘They was to come here but the ship sank — all of ’em was thick as thieves, they say, and it was all Mr Darcy’s anyhow.’

‘Mr Darcy!’ she cried. ‘Why, is he the cousin who died?’ With a horror quite out of proportion to their brief acquaintance, she thought of the brother and sister she had met, and particularly him, that tall, virile young man. And now — dead!

‘Oh yes, ma’am, him and his sister both. Very sad business.’

Elizabeth’s mind was whirling. She forced herself to gather her composure. She must make a good impression, and there was no reason to fall to pieces over two people she scarcely knew.

Miss Darcy’s shy smile, her brother’s keen dark gaze, they all flashed before her eyes.

‘Thank you,’ she said firmly, ‘that will be all.’

‘Yes, ma’am.’

She walked up the lane, noticing the park’s many beauties, the church nearby, the stream winding its way through the hills. The estate, at least, seemed an improvement on London.

‘You must be the governess,’ the housekeeper said disapprovingly.

‘Yes, I am.’ Elizabeth lifted her chin. ‘Could you please take me to Lord Carlisle? He said I was to — ’

‘Mrs Lindsay! Mrs Lindsay, have you — oh!’ The source of the interruption, a young woman of about Kitty’s age, tall, dark, and handsome, examined Elizabeth with cool green eyes. ‘You must be the governess,’ she said.

‘Yes, madam, I — ’

Something unfamiliar flickered across her face, then vanished. ‘I am Catherine Fitzwilliam; my husband and I are cousins of Lord Carlisle.—Mrs Lindsay, Sally and Polly are quarrelling again.’

Mrs Lindsay bustled off.

‘I beg your pardon, ma’am,’ said Elizabeth firmly, ‘but I was instructed to present myself to Lord Carlisle immediately.’

‘Yes, of course. I will take you to him.’

Without another word, she set off, Elizabeth hurrying to keep up with her long strides.

‘I am glad you are English,’ she said after a moment. ‘Oh, my husband is the vicar. My cousin was good enough to offer him the living, though I think Edward is very put out that we live in the vicarage.’

‘Thank you.’

‘We are cousins, you see, all three of us. You shall probably teach my son one day. He is Edward’s
heir.’

They come to a door, slightly ajar, and Elizabeth caught a snippet of conversation: ‘Fitzwilliam, I do not like this — ’

‘Edward,’ said Mrs Fitzwilliam brightly, ‘I have brought Miss Bennet!’

Elizabeth’s eyes turned to the two men standing near the chimneypiece. One was dark, the other very fair, and she could perceive no difference more significant than that. Both were tall and handsome, their faces marked by the same sharp slash of cheekbones and jaw, and they stood in precisely the same manner — upright, confident, arms crossed and one leg stretched out.

‘Miss Bennet, you come highly recommended,’ said the darker one, looking rather discomposed. His cousin seemed only amused. ‘I expect you shall fulfil your duties satisfactorily.’

‘As do I, sir.’

The other laughed outright. ‘Could you be any more brusque, cousin? Miss Bennet, this boor is your employer, Lord Carlisle, and I am James Fitzwilliam, vicar of the parish.’ Only then did he seem to notice his wife, and his expression softened. ‘Ah, Catherine. How are the children?’

‘Alexander is the most peaceful of the lot,’ she said dryly. ‘Apparently, Julia’s coughing kept Diana awake all night, so this morning she told her that monsters eat little girls with colds.’

‘Speaking of whom,’ said Lord Carlisle, ‘I believe they should meet their new governess.’

Elizabeth could not help wondering how many governesses they’d gone through already. She straightened to her full five feet of height, preparing for the worst even as she answered the gentlemen’s idle questions.

Against all expectation, however, Elizabeth liked the Miss Fitzwilliams almost immediately. The elder, Diana, was ten years old, gangly and clever; her sister Julia was only six, but talked easily and cheerfully between sniffles and sneezes. Both seemed friendly and eager to please, though Elizabeth had no doubts that they could be as mischievous and unruly as most children.

‘I can play the pianoforte,’ Diana informed her.

‘I want to, too,’ Julia added. ‘Miss Lynch didn’t know so she couldn’t teach me.’

‘She couldn’t speak French either. And she couldn’t —’

Lord Carlisle cleared his throat. ‘That is quite enough, I believe. You want to enjoy the last of your holiday, as lessons begin tomorrow; Run along, both of you — and Julia, do not leave the house without your coat and gloves.’

Both girls scampered off, and the viscount turned to Elizabeth. ‘You have had a long journey,’ he observed. ‘Perhaps you would care to rest for a few hours. I shall have — er —’

‘Polly,’ suggested Mr Fitzwilliam.

‘Yes, of course.—Polly will take you to your room.’ He sent for the maid, who turned out to be a friendly, well-spoken Englishwoman.

The entire situation, it seemed, was as perfect as it could possibly be. Yet as Elizabeth walked away, the three Fitzwilliams’ eyes still on her, she could not help feeling that something here was not as it
appeared - was *wrong*.

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